

The Black Baseball Heroes of '09

"Old War Horse" Harrison Pitched the Occidental Team to the Undisputed State Championship in a Fun Season. *

By Miriam B. Murphy

On a cold April 4, 1909, in Salt Lake City the Occidentals faced the Independents in the first game of the new baseball season. A crowd of 1,500 turned out for the Sunday afternoon contest. Walker field was in rough shape. So were the players. The two teams made a total of 13 errors!

Play had to be stopped in the sixth inning when all the balls had been fouled over the grandstand fence. Searchers were sent to find them so the game could continue.

The Occidentals took an early lead. By the seventh inning the black team was ahead 10 to 3. But the Independents came up with five runs in the bottom of the seventh. Then, according to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, "The Occidentals nearly took a fit and they offered their pitcher everything they had if he would only go in and shut out the 'white trash' during the remainder of the game." Pitcher Harrison got the message, although he did allow one more run. The Occidentals won 10 to 9 and the season was off to a hilarious start.

The Occidentals were one of a dozen teams that hoped to win the state baseball champion ship. The newspaper called these teams amateurs. They would probably be called semipro today. The players received some money from ticket sales. They also won or lost money by betting with opposing players or fans.

There was no league. The team managers arranged games from week to week with teams from other Utah towns or neighboring states.

After their first taste of victory, the Occidentals won the next two. Then they began a long slump, losing 13 of the next 15 games. Most of these defeats came at the hands of the Montana and Idaho teams they played on a two-week road trip. By summer the Occidentals had juggled their lineup several times. New players had joined the team. "Old War Horse" Harrison, "Dude" Langford, and Tennant did most of the pitching with Langley as catcher. By July 9 the *Tribune* could report that the Occidentals were having a winning year.



The Occidentals were not the only black baseball team to compete against white teams in Utah. Black troops stationed at Forts Duchesne and Douglas played local ball clubs in the late nineteenth century. Drawing by Frederic Remington of a black cavalryman.

Winning Streak

For Pioneer Day the Occidental manager lined up a trip to Payson to play one of the toughest teams in the state. But the black team remained on its winning streak. Tennant pitched a good game and shortstop Robison made a sensational catch that robbed the Paysonites of a hit. Hawkins, the third baseman, hit a home run for the victors. The Occidentals returned home by way of Eureka where they played and beat the mining town team.

The *Tribune* praised the black team's winning ways: "The Occidentals are a hard bunch to beat when they are playing ball in form and they have gained so much confidence in themselves the last week that they carry their pockets full of money which they want to bet on a game with any team in the state."

The Occidentals wanted to renew their rivalry with the Independents. But that team was "tired of playing to \$25 crowds" and had disbanded. The Occidentals went on to play teams in Idaho instead. By the time they returned to Salt Lake City a new Independent team had been put together. The two teams met on August 1 with the Occidentals winning a thriller in the ninth, 4 to 3, when Langley hit a double to score Hawkins who had walked.

A Famous Umpire

In mid-August came the event of the season. Black boxer Jack Johnson, the world heavy weight champion, arrived in Salt Lake City. The champ, who had played a lot of baseball in his teens, agreed to umpire a game between the Occidentals and the Independents.

Players often treated umpires roughly in those days. So the heavyweight laid down the law: "Johnson says that he will not stand to have any of his decisions questioned by any 'ignorant' baseball player, and will not stand to have the

game delayed. 'Play ball all the time,' says Johnson, 'while I am umpiring the game.' "

Most of the city's black residents and many whites turned out for the August 19 game at Walker field. The Occidentals won 6 to 4. Neither team played its best with each side chalking up five errors. The Tribune liked Johnson's umpiring: "The colored pugilist displayed a passing knowledge of the game and umpired as fairly as he could, giving general satisfaction to both sides." The champ left for Oakland to begin training for his next boxing match. The two ball clubs planned a rematch.

On August 22 the Independents sent Kilburn, a hot young player from Stanford University, to the mound against the Occidentals. The black team trailed 7 to 5 in the top of the eighth inning. With a man on first, Hawkins came to bat for the Occidentals. The base runner took a long lead. The catcher got ready to throw him out at second base, but Hawkins stepped on home plate to block the throw! That started a grand rhuarb. The umpire called Hawkins out for interference. His black teammates crowded onto the field to argue the decision. Play was stopped for 20 minutes. It was no use; the white team went on to win 11 to 6.



Artist: Darrell Thomas



Heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson took time out to umpire one of the Occidentals' games in Salt Lake City. United Press International photograph.

To show there were no hard feelings, the Occidentals loaned the Independents four of their star players—Black, Hawkins, Harrison, and Tennant—for a game against Heber City. Harrison struck out eight Heberites, and Black at second base made several brilliant catches. But the integrated team lost a close one, 4 to 3. The Heber players began calling themselves the state champions.

Back in Salt Lake City the Occidentals took on the *Tribune* team. "Chocolates Win from Newspaper Boys by Score of 3 to 2," read the August 30 headline.

Then the black team took its final road trip to the Juab County mining towns. A crowd of 600 saw them defeat Silver City 8 to 4 in the rain. At Eureka they stopped the miners 5 to 3 in a well-played contest that drew many spectators.

Returning home, the Occidentals defeated the Independents 5 to 4 in another game that saw the black team loudly protest the umpire's calls. Catcher Langley threw down his mitt and mask and began yelling at the umpire. Many of the fans—including Langley's wife—joined in. "Dude" Langford had started at the pitcher's spot for the black team, but he was shaky. The manager moved him to right field to keep his bat in the lineup and let Harrison finish pitching for the winners.

The Black Champions

After defeating the Yampa smelter team at Murray in mid-September, the Occidentals began to call themselves the champions. Other teams around the state disputed the black team's claim. The teams talked of arranging some playoff games. However, early snows ended the baseball season for the Heber City, Park City, and Eureka teams.

On September 29 the Occidentals blanked Yampa 8 to 0 with "Old War Horse" Harrison on the mound. The *Tribune* noted that the game was free of the usual wrangling over the umpire's calls.

Then, on October 3, the Occidentals and the Yampa smelter team met in a final game. Only seven black players showed up at game time, but it made no difference, the *Tribune* stated. The team picked up two men at Walker field to fill their lineup. Harrison pitched a three-hitter. His teammate, "Bumblefoot" Burns, hit three balls over the heads of the opposing fielders to lead the blacks to a 5 to 1 victory. For the *Tribune* the game was decisive. They named the Occidentals the "undisputed state baseball champions."

The success of this black baseball team and its popularity show one of the roles of sports in American society. In many cases, successful athletes became heroes despite their race or national origin. Over the years, sports like baseball and boxing have given Irish, Italians, blacks, and Hispanics a means of achieving economic status when other doors were closed to them.

Major league baseball did not begin to integrate its teams until 1947 with the arrival of Jackie Robinson on the Brooklyn Dodgers. And except for sporting events, blacks were not likely, until recent times, to receive fair coverage in the newspaper. But during the baseball season of 1909 a black team played and defeated the best white teams in Utah and was crowned the state champion by the local newspaper. The Occidentals' accomplishment is especially interesting since by 1909 segregation of the two races had become entrenched as a result of the 1896 "separate but equal" decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Endnotes

Accounts of the games were taken from the *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 5 through October 4, 1909.

*This article first appeared in *Beehive History* 7 (1981), an annual publication of the Utah State Historical Society and is being published on the Utah State Historical Society's web page to highlight a black baseball team, the Occidentals, importance to baseball and social history in Utah at the turn of the twentieth century as the baseball world remembers Jackie Robinson and the integration of major league baseball this year--2007.